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Nicole Dombrowski Risser, *France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight and Family Survival during World War II*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xv, 312. ISBN 978-1-107-025232-5.

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After German troops crossed the Meuse River on 13 May 1940 and rapidly advanced across northern France, millions of civilians in desperation fled the invading army, expecting a long, drawn-out conflict like World War I. Ill-prepared for the hardships of the road, they suffered from hunger, fatigue, and exposure as well as Luftwaffe strafings and bombings. When the Battle of France ended with an armistice in mid-June, roughly 6.1 million persons were refugees in their own country; adding in 1.8 million Belgians and some 150,000 Dutch and Luxembourgers who had sought refuge in France,¹ the result was the “largest refugee crisis in Europe’s history” (285).

The focus of scholarly interest in this “exodus” has shifted significantly over time. Its first historians concentrated mostly on military consequences. They tried, for example, to determine whether the hindering of military traffic by the flood of refugees on the roads had contributed to France’s defeat. They also investigated whether a fifth column had incited civilian flight precisely to spread chaos behind French lines.² Most historians now agree, however, that the conflict in France had been decided well before traffic congestion became an issue. Nor is there any evidence that a fifth column had encouraged civilians to flee their homes. Consequently, scholars have turned their attention to the significance of the exodus not in military matters, but in French civilian life and governance. It is to this second stage of exodus historiography that Nicole Dombrowski Risser (Towson Univ.) has contributed in *France under Fire*.³

Risser draws on extensive research in French national and local archives, published primary sources, and interviews with civilians who experienced the exodus in her investigation of government planning for civilian evacuations, civilian demands for protection, the crisis of May–June 1940, the treatment of refugees in host areas, and their return to their homes in summer and fall 1940. Besides sketching the broad contours of this story on a national level, she offers in-depth case studies of the departure of refugees from the department (*département*) of the Marne and their reception in the department of the Corrèze.

Part I of the book, “Civilians in the Line of Fire,” explores the French state’s preparation for civil defense and evacuations of inhabitants as well as experiences of the exodus itself, which, Risser writes, varied by class, gender, and race. French interwar plans were undermined by the assumption that the next war would resemble the relatively static and geographically limited First World War. Thus, the initial focus was on evacuating Alsace and Lorraine. Nearby Reims, by contrast, was designated to receive refugees and unprepared to evacuate its population. When the French military began to collapse, civilians received little direction or assistance from authorities who were simply overtaken by events. Lacking information, due to a heavily censored press, they fled on the basis of rumor. For the chaos and hardship of the exodus, the government, the military, and the press were to blame, Risser concludes (107). Since most of the population felt the Third Republic was at fault, “the German invasion did not immediately illicit [*sic*] a critique of fascism, rather, if anything, it confirmed for many the deep criticisms of the dying republic” (135). The Vichy regime that emerged from France’s defeat took advantage of the trauma of the exodus to justify its decision to sue for peace and “to reorganize enthusiasm for French natalist-familialism” (118).

1. See Hannah Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007) 150.

2. See Jean Vidalenc, *L’Exode de mai-juin 1940* (Paris: Presses U de France, 1957).

3. Originating in a 1995 NYU dissertation: “Beyond the Battlefield: The French Civilian Exodus of May-June 1940,” directed by Tony Judt and Mary Nolan.

Part II, “Refugees, Rights, and Return in a Divided Land,” is more original. Housing and feeding refugees were major challenges. In the Corrèze, for example, evacuees doubled the population. Although conditions were difficult, refugees were at first well treated because of the egalitarianism of the local left-wing populace. But the efforts of the local prefect to provide universal refugee allocations soon “fell victim to the proliferation of ideologically determined categories of relief entitlement” (176). Indeed, Risser argues, the crisis gave Vichy its first chance to develop criteria for inclusion and exclusion; thus, beginning in July 1940, refugees had to declare under oath whether they were “aryenne ou israélite” (164). More importantly, the Germans imposed and Vichy accepted the exclusion of Communists, Jews, and foreigners from crossing the Line of Demarcation from the Unoccupied Zone to the Occupied Zone as refugees returned home. Thus, “the Line of Demarcation emerged as a fundamental tool in the racialization of bureaucratic practices in France that ultimately contributed to the German project of ethnic cleansing in western Europe” (202–3). Others could not return home because of German restrictions on movement into the “Forbidden” and “Reserved” zones of northern and eastern France. Those who somehow managed to return to the Forbidden zone had to evacuate a second time in winter 1940–41, when the British began intensive bombing of the Channel coast. These evacuations repeated the mistakes of the earlier ones, but led Louis Florentin Marlier, who directed Vichy’s Service of Refugees, to realize that the state must subsidize the evacuation of workers who otherwise could not afford to leave their jobs and homes.

France under Fire contains a larger argument about the exodus and its aftermath, notably that civilians’—especially women’s—demands for protection were “a major milestone in the evolution of the demand for universal human rights during wartime, ... a transformational moment in the development of an international consciousness with regard to human rights as linked to refugee rights and civilian wartime protection laws” (82, 280). Such sweeping claims are unpersuasive. Though Risser uncovers many examples of civilians demanding assistance from the French state, they did not do so on the basis of universal human rights, as she herself recognizes (135). Further, there is little evidence that the French experience of 1940 motivated later changes in human rights norms. Risser presents only unsupported assertions of subterranean influence, arguing, for example, that outrage against the bombing of civilians in 1940 “helped to define a new standard for wartime criminal behavior” (274). But that standard was only defined in 1977 by the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. Risser, however, cautions that

We should not consider the delay in criminalizing the bombing of civilians as evidence of a failure of wartime civilians to turn their security demands into legal principles in the immediate aftermath of the war. Rather we should consider the significance of civilian women’s expanding citizenship in the postwar era as having contributed to advancing a principle that Allied leaders resisted articulating in 1949. Along with the expanding human rights agenda of the 1970s, the revision to the laws of war revealed a growing consciousness of the potential for mass annihilation inherent in the arms race of the Cold War, but anchored in the testimonies of atrocities committed during World War II. (277)

The crisis of spring 1940 may have influenced the human rights revolution of the 1970s, but Risser presents neither any evidence for this nor a reason to believe the French exodus experience of World War II was so much more compelling than that of other countries as to constitute a “transformational moment.” Further, she misses the larger point of Samuel Moyn’s important study of the history of human rights, which she cites in making her argument. For Moyn, our contemporary understanding of human rights—especially the rights of citizens to protection from states—was not a reverberation of the Holocaust or World War II, but rather emerged as the “last utopia,” following the collapse of competing utopias in the 1970s.⁴

Although Risser’s overarching thesis is unconvincing, her book is valuable for the strong case it makes for the true significance of the exodus and its aftermath for Vichy France. While scholars of World War II should read *France under Fire*, general interest readers will likely be put off by its academic prose and should turn to Hanna Diamond’s *Fleeing Hitler*⁵ for a more accessible history of this episode.

4. See *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2010). The spelling “Moyen” for Moyn is one of the few misprints in the book.

5. Note 1 above.